

ASSASSINATION

Murder in the Cathedral

"That was a golden time for us back in the Sixties," said Sylvia Meagher, reminiscing over the early days when the critics of the Warren Commission Report were doing their homework, trading their arcane information with one another and writing their books on the conspiracy. "Then we started fighting among ourselves. . . ." Her voice trailed off, the violins came up there in the bar of the Colonial Inn in Georgetown and she pondered her drink (tomato juice, no vodka, on the rocks).

"Right," said Josiah (Ting) Thompson, stirring his whiskey sour. "In fact, all the critics have fought with one another so bitterly that many are still not speaking to this very day. I think that Sylvia and I are among the few who are still on friendly terms."

Thompson, a Haverford College philosophy professor, wrote *Six Seconds in Dallas*, a seminal work which demonstrated that one lone rifleman on the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository couldn't possibly have fired the bullets that killed President John F. Kennedy on November 22nd, 1963. No one has ever refuted that book, and it's one of the reasons why an overwhelming majority of Americans believe that President Kennedy was done in by a conspiracy.

Meagher is the UN official and independent researcher who indexed the Warren Commission's 26 volumes and then wrote *Accessories After the Fact*, an opus which gave the authorities reason enough to reopen several investigations into JFK's murder, reasons, however, which they found themselves able to resist.

The two of them were relaxing over drinks after a full day's meeting at Georgetown University to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the President's death. But they would soon have to revise their views on the bickering critics, for if anything came out of the two-day meeting there in the frescoed auditorium of old Gaston Hall, it was this: The conference marked a real change for the buffs. Critics who hadn't spoken to each other for years now started talking: Popkin to Weisberg, Weisberg to Policoff, Policoff to Sprague. And, later that evening, at a party given by Bernard Fensterwald, the director of the Committee to Investigate Assassinations, everyone talked to everyone.

It was a time of renewal and reconciliation for all the old critics and, more importantly, a time when it was clear that many other new, respectable researchers had joined the club. "I'm en-

couraged," said Jerry Policoff, retreating specifically to the climate newly established here in Georgetown, and adding, vis-a-vis a new national climate moderated by the winds of Watergate, "People don't call me a lunatic any more." Policoff, who is a media analyst in New York, had been working on the JFK assassination for years, but finally, out of sheer frustration, put all his materials in cartons and sealed them up and said the hell with it.

The years from November, 1963, to November, 1973, were an exhausting decade for the critics. They worked,

they produced findings which were hard to ignore and yet public officials did ignore them, gave them so little of a hearing that the critics began to feel that maybe they were lunatics.

Norman Mailer, who keynoted the conference and hung around for the entire two days, focused right on the mark when he compared the obsessed critic to a jealous lover, who in his affliction careens between the two extremes of hating his unfaithful wife for her unspeakable conduct and hating himself for his unspeakable imaginings. "What has made this history unendurable," said Mailer, "were two opposed hypoth-

eses: 1) that it was just an accident, which leads to a philosophy of the absurd, and 2) any one of the grand conspiracy themes. And anything in between."

But now it was obvious from what was happening here at the conference (and from the daily news reports about all the malfeasance and the misfeasance in government not so very far away from Georgetown) that the times are indeed changing.

Here at Georgetown, new critics came forward with evidence to create new doubts, old critics presented items which could trigger new tries for the truth.

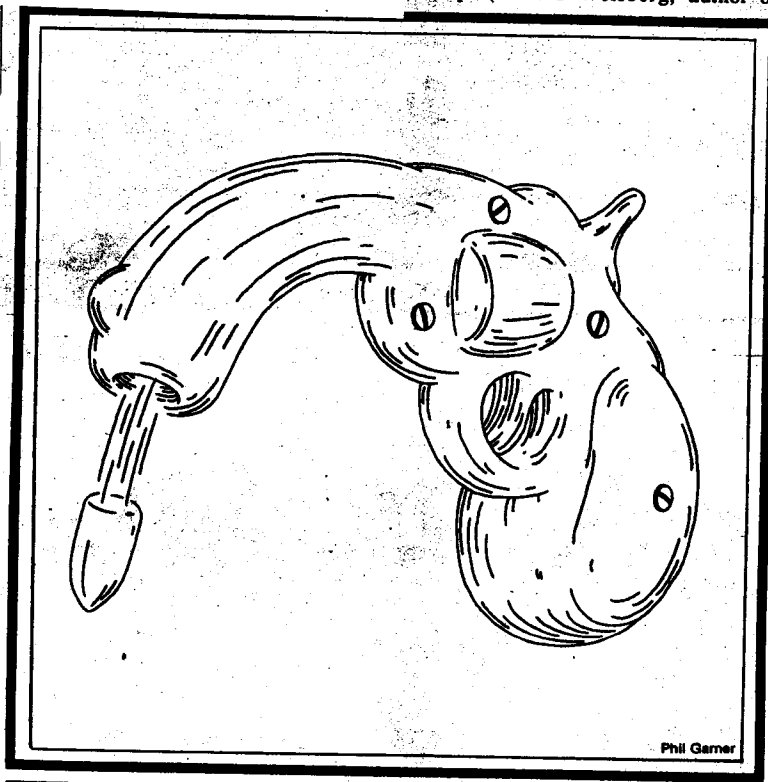
•Dr. Cyril Wecht, the coroner of Pittsburgh and one of the leading pathologists in the US, spent hours on the podium explaining why he does not believe that any single human being could have handled the shooting of JFK.

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Wecht is a man whose looks and vigor reminded me of no one so much as Vince Lombardi. He has had the almost singular benefit of access to many medical and pathological reports on the JFK assassination which are still technically secret and he doesn't buy the Warren Commission's keystone theory of the single bullet, based on the evidence he has now. What more does he need? Among other things: a spectographic analysis of the bullet fragments removed from both Kennedy and Governor Connolly. The FBI, he says, has the evidence, but the FBI won't cough it up. (Harold Weisberg, author of

bullet that entered JFK's upper back exited just below his Adam's apple, without striking any of the President's bones. Dr. Foreman showed on a series of elaborate photographic charts that such a shot, fired from the sixth floor of the book depository, couldn't have hit JFK at the angle it did and still have continued on to hit Governor Connolly.

•Pete Noyes, a corpulent TV news producer from L.A. who is the model for the Edward Asner character on *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, has been working for at least six years on the



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Frame Up, told the conference that he has had a tip-off on that spectographic analysis: It, too, will destroy the single-bullet theory.)

•Dr. Robert Foreman, a chinless anthropologist from Toledo, Ohio, presented his study of a simulated JFK "skeleton." According to all reports, the

Mafia connections to the JFK assassination. Here, at last, after several publishers canceled their contracts to publish his conclusions, Noyes proudly presented his just-published account, *Legacy Of Doubt* (a Pinnacle paperback). Noyes doesn't solve the conspiracy in the book. But he names names, he tells how he knows what he knows and he points out the directions that authorities must take—if they really want to do their jobs.

•Peter Dale Scott, a tall, ascetic and scholarly professor of medieval literature at the University of California at Berkeley, and the author of a book on the Vietnam War, *The War Conspiracy*, pointed out to the audience that there are ways we can all learn from Watergate some significant things about the methodology of a cover-up. "The physical evidence presented by Dr. Wecht is good," he said, "but that won't tell us who the real suspects are. Examining the cover-ups in the Dallas affair will help us find our suspects."

•George O'Toole, a former CIA computer specialist who looks like Santa Claus with a black beard, showed the audience how he has used a new "truth machine" called the Psychological Stress Evaluator (PSE) to evaluate previously recorded statements about the assassination by former Chief Justice Earl Warren; James E. Humes, the chief autopsy surgeon at Bethesda Naval Hospital who burned his original notes on the autopsy; Howard Brennan, the man who told the Warren Commission he had seen Oswald shooting at President Kennedy from the window of the book depository, and several other Dal-

las officials who were involved in the initial investigation of the shooting. All these men showed great stress, said O'Toole (pointing to slide projections of their voice patterns as recorded by the PSE) which might mean they were not telling the truth. The PSE, he said, was 94% accurate in the hands of an expert. O'Toole said he has been working for a year on these analyses; sometime next year he will turn over his findings to the Justice Department and to members of Congress.

Congress. That may be where all these new investigations will wind up. Unofficially, this conference at Georgetown (which was sponsored by the private Committee to Investigate Assassinations) issued no white paper or set of conclusions. But almost every speaker implied that only a subcommittee of Congress could get to the bottom of things—because only Congress or the courts had the power to subpoena witnesses under oath or levy penalties on those who wouldn't talk. The Watergate committee is, of course, something of a model.

What chances that a congressional committee will take over from the lonely critics? Slim now, I think, but growing, as the consciousness of a wider public grows that there are some answers out there and that this nation needs them. While the so-called "straight press" has largely ignored the critics for years now, the Washington Post reported this Georgetown confer-

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ence as soberly as it has reported anything on the Watergate scandal. And three staff members of Congressman Morris Udall's office looked in on the discussions at Gaston Hall so they could report to Udall, a brother of Stewart, JFK's Secretary of the Interior and himself a key figure among the so-called "Kennedy Democrats" in Congress.

During the Sixties, before the Garrison charges against Clay Shaw in New Orleans, before the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Senator Robert F. Kennedy, before, in sum, the information overload short-circuited the critical faculties of those who liked their thinking neat and tidy, there was a measured receptivity among many to this, that or another theory on the conspiracy to kill JFK. But what good are theories that multiply as the years pass

and lead nowhere? Did any of the conspiracy theories about the death of JFK, for instance, save the life of his brother?

Curious, strange, remarkable thing: It was only the amateurs, the philosophy profs and the private citizens who had the theories, who tried to map new avenues of investigation. But they had no resources to travel. What about the FBI and the CIA and the whole so-called intelligence community? Wasn't there a single agent who had theories of his own? Any of them asking questions? And if so, why weren't any of them given some kind of go-ahead to run down some answers?

Some conspiracy buffs said the reason was obvious: because the intelligence community itself was complicit in either the assassination or the cover-up. But the events of the past year or two (the Pentagon Papers, the Watergate business and all the other inside stories about the way the secret government has worked) suggest another, less sinister answer: that the intelligence community was neither intelligent nor a community—i.e., that the patterns of secrecy within government precluded open exchanges of information, frequently not even among themselves, never with the public at large.

That kind of operational secrecy is changing (not nearly fast enough, but it is changing). The conference's media panel (of which I was a member) agreed that the press is putting on unprecedented pressures to blast open the secret government. A craggy character like Sherman Skolnick, the paraplegic from Chicago who successfully agitated for the conviction of Judge Otto Kerner, with that most subversive of all tools, information, could well be emulated by other information commandos.

Radical youth may take this kind of lead and run with it. Norman Mailer prophesies that a growing movement on the nation's campuses—gathering political intelligence—could become as big as the peace movement. That may help the assassination critics get an official reopening of the investigations into the assassinations of two Kennedys and a King.

Then again, no amount of agitation may win a public constituency large enough to demand that Congress do something very special (and without the public demand, Congress usually does nothing).

The reason: Assassinations are more ghastly than burglaries and assorted other political dirty tricks, and if many think that impeaching a President is obscene, what are they to think about dredging up thoughts of having his brains blown out? They don't want to think about it. And the very people who should think about it most—the Kennedy clan (and that includes the Salingers and the Schlesingers and the Man-kiewicz who refused to even read my

book on the Robert Kennedy assassination)—want to think about it least.

On this ground, apparently, the Washington, D.C., appeals courts have so far been denying the Committee to Investigate Assassinations access to key records the Committee and its members need. "*Requiescat in pace*," wrote Judge John Anthony Danaher in a recent opinion denying Harold Weisberg a look at the FBI's spectographic analysis.

The Judge has a point. During the Georgetown conference, the experts spent a full afternoon on bullets, brains and ballistics and when they turned off the lights to show the audience their ghoulish slides and the afternoon rays shone in the high stained glass windows of Gaston Hall, I jotted in my notebook, "Murder in the Cathedral." It was too much for me and for many of the several hundred spectators who were there, unused to such a cool, scientific treatment of such a hot, emotional subject. Some

became visibly uneasy, almost ill. I went for a walk.

And then that night at the Fensterwald party, Robert Grodin, a young filmmaker from New Jersey who is working with a group intending to do a documentary on the assassination of JFK, showed up with another generation of the film shot by Abraham Zapruder in Dallas. Grodin and an optics technician had spent exhaustive hours enlarging the central detail, i.e., the President and Mrs. Kennedy, of each frame of the Zapruder film and here, toward the end of the party, Grodin ran the enlarged version several times. It is clear from this film (which eliminates to a large extent the shaky effect of a hand-held camera) that the shot which took the top off President Kennedy's head came not from the direction of the book depository but from the grassy knoll.

The realization drove some of us to

tears and then to whiskeyed inebriation. Later, about 3 AM at another gathering back in Georgetown, I almost got into a fistfight with an asshole who was claiming that Senator Robert Kennedy was also killed in a crossfire.

But irrationality is the easy way out. No matter how much it hurts, we have to consider any and all evidence which may be germane to the issue. Of course, we could withdraw from the issue entirely. But, as Mailer said at this conference, that would make us less interesting as human beings. And being mired in secrecy would make our society a frightful place.

—Robert Blair Kaiser

Kaiser, a former Time correspondent, wrote the only critical history of the Robert Kennedy assassination, 'R.F.K. Must Die!'